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Note: Full text of letter and list of signing food pantries follows this release.

More than three dozen local food pantries issue call to action in full-page ad:
"Dane County, we need your help"

MADISON - A coalition of 36 Dane County food pantries released a letter to the community on Tuesday, sounding an alarm about the rising number of people facing food insecurity and the need for both immediate support and longer-term solutions to the challenges of distributing enough food to meet the growing need.

The letter, published as a full-page ad in Tuesday's print edition of the Wisconsin State Journal, begins: "Dane County, we need your help." The cost of the ad was co-sponsored by United Way of Dane County and the newspaper.

"As Dane County food pantries, we serve thousands of people in our community each day. Our shared mission is to make sure our neighbors don't face hunger," the letter said. "But we are facing a serious challenge."

The food pantries also held a press conference Tuesday morning at the state Capitol, where they were scheduled to be joined by local officials and community leaders, including Madison Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway, Janel Heinrich, Executive Director of Public Health Madison & Dane County, state legislators, county supervisors, and other invited guests.

“Because of the urgency of the situation, we are coming together for the first time as food pantries to make our community aware of the challenges we face in meeting the need,” said Ellen Carlson, Executive Director for WayForward Resources. “Our current resources can only stretch so far.”

Their call to action comes as visits to many pantries in the fastest-growing county in Wisconsin have more than doubled in the past two years. The result of this increased need is pantries are spending more money on food than ever before as the options they have to keep shelves stocked “continue to shift and are more limited than they were just a few years ago,” the letter said. The pantries stress that buying food in bulk is more expensive now and the traditional suppliers of free food for pantries can’t keep up with the demand.

“The dual effect of the high cost of food and more people needing help poses a significant challenge to all local pantries,” Julie Bennett, CEO & Executive Director at the Society of St. Vincent de Paul — Madison, said. “This is the mission we're called to — to help people in need. Our hope is that more people in Dane County will join us by giving what they can this month, next month, and into the future. This is a long term issue we can only address together.”

Pantry leaders said the pressure will rise in the coming weeks as kids have less access to free food with schools out for the summer.

“Millions of people in this country are just one job loss or health emergency away from hunger,” said Marcia Kasieta, Business Director of Badger Prairie Needs Network in Verona. “Food insecurity in Dane County is real and as the region grows so does the demand for food pantry services. Pantries are working double-time to address this increase.”

The food pantries’ letter explained what is driving demand, including higher food prices, dramatic increases in rent and the fact that federal assistance that helped people make ends meet during the pandemic is gone. The most recent data on food insecurity in Dane County shows an increase in people not having enough to eat and not knowing where their next meal is coming from. According to the Mind the Meal Gap report recently released by Feeding America, nearly 13% of kids in Dane County were food insecure in 2022, up from 7.5% in 2021. That increase was even before local pantries started seeing sharp upticks in demand.

“It is increasingly hard for families to make ends meet, and with very little government support for families post-pandemic, we are continuing to see more and more households turning to food pantries for help,” said Catie Badsing, Manager of Food Security Programs for the Sun Prairie Food Pantry at Sunshine Place. “Pantries are spending more on food than ever before to keep our shelves stocked.”

There is not a quick or easy fix to food insecurity and the structural and economic factors that drive it, according to the letter. But pantries say this is “a critical moment for us to come together for our neighbors. There are a number of immediate actions people in our community can take to support local pantries in meeting the need, including:

-Organize a food drive for your local pantry

-Look at your own budget to figure out how much you can donate to your local pantry to support neighbors in need; give monthly if you can to provide a steady stream of support.

-Reach out to your local pantry and ask what food items they need most and buy those items to donate when you go to the grocery store.

-Volunteer your time. There are a variety of opportunities to get more involved in helping food pantries support the community.

“Community support is how pantries are able to serve thousands of people in need every day, but we need more people to join our mission,” said Rhonda Adams, Executive Director of The River Food Pantry. “There are things people can do right now — donations of money, food, and volunteer support are vital to helping us meet this record need. We believe our community has the power and resources to help ensure local pantries can continue to be there for our neighbors who rely on us to feed themselves and their families.”

Pantries also urged local, county, state, and federal officials, as well as other community leaders, to help find long-term solutions to food insecurity.

“Our pantries are not failing, quite the contrary,” said Letesha Nelson, President and Executive Director, Goodman Community Center. “Our pantries are collectively stepping up, but our efforts are not sustainable without more help given our current infrastructure that relies heavily on in-kind donations and volunteer participation.”

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LETTER TO COMMUNITY:

Dane County, we need your help.

As Dane County food pantries, we serve thousands of people in our community each day. Our shared mission is to make sure our neighbors don't face hunger.

But we are facing a serious challenge.

Visits to many of our food pantries have more than doubled in the past two years. We know some of the reasons why. Food prices are higher and rent is rising more here than anywhere else in the country. Federal assistance that helped people make ends meet during the pandemic is gone. We are also the fastest-growing county in Wisconsin. Nearly 13% of kids in Dane County were food insecure in 2022, up from 7.5% in 2021 — and that was before our food pantries started seeing drastic increases in demand.

We're also spending more on food than ever before.

The options we have to keep our shelves stocked continue to shift and are more limited than they were just a few years ago. Buying food in bulk is more expensive now and our traditional suppliers of free food can't keep up with the demand. Permanent changes to the food system over the last few years mean there is less surplus available for our food pantries.

These trends make it challenging to keep food on our shelves.

Food pantries have worked hard to stretch our resources, space, and teams as far as possible. The pressure will rise in the coming weeks as kids have less access to free food with schools out for the summer.

You can help.

Making a financial donation to your local food pantry enables them to purchase needed food. We welcome food drives and volunteers, too. We know there is no quick or easy fix to food insecurity and the structural and economic factors that drive it. So we urge our local, county, state, and federal officials, as well as other community leaders, to help find long-term solutions to food insecurity. We can't do it alone.

This is a critical moment for us to come together for our neighbors.

When our community supports local food pantries, we are stronger. With access to food, kids can learn, families can work, and seniors can stay healthy. It will take all of us to meet this

challenge and make sure our neighbors don’t experience hunger. We are committed to doing all we can. We are asking you to join us.

In partnership with you,

Allied Food Pantry
Babies & Beyond of WI, Inc.
Badger Prairie Needs Network
Bayview Community Center Pantry
Catholic Multicultural Center
Community Action Coalition for South Central Wisconsin
Deerfield Community Center
East Madison Community Center
Extended Hands Pantry
Fountain of Life Covenant Church
Good Shepherd Food Pantry
Goodman Community Center's Fritz Food Pantry
Grace Food Pantry
Great Lakes Dryhootch Madison
Heights Unlimited Community Resource Center (Mazomanie)
Islamic Community of Madison
Kennedy Heights Food Pantry
Lakeview Food Pantry
Lussier Community Education Center - Food Pantry
Mission Nutrition DeForest
Neighborhood House Community Center Food Pantry
Neighbors Helping Neighbors, Mt. Horeb
Oregon Area Food Pantry
OutReach LGBTQ+ Community Center
Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin
Society of St. Vincent de Paul - Madison Food Pantry
St. Mark’s Lutheran Church Food Pantry
Stoughton Food Pantry
Stoughton United Methodist Church Food Pantry
Sun Prairie Food Pantry at Sunshine Place
The Keep Food Pantry
The River Food Pantry
Vivent Health Food Pantry
Waunakee Food Pantry
WayForward Resources
Willy Street Pantry at the Social Justice Center